http://www.soyouwanna.com/site/syws/poem/poem2.html#top

We know you've tried all these years to avoid it. You stayed the hell away from those cats haunting the coffee shops, the ones that dress in black and smoke American Spirits. Or maybe you're actually into this stuff. It's perfectly legal. More likely, though, it's the one required literature course you just couldn't avoid.

The time has come to read a poem, figure out what the hell the poet is talking about, and ask yourself why he or she couldn't just send a telegram. We're here to help: read on, and learn how to interpret a poem with flair. And guys, as to whether poetry will really help you "woo women," we're afraid the jury's out on that one.

Attention to the line as a basic element, not the sentence  
Greater focus on the sound of words  
Density  
Associations  
Irony

Before you interpret a poem, there's a little detail you have to make sure of: that what you're reading is, in fact, a poem. So what makes a poem a poem? Concentrate on these five things: the line, the sound, the density, the associations, and the irony. Not every poem will exhibit all of these features, but they're a good starting point anyway.

**Attention to the line as a basic element, not the sentence**

The **line** is a poem's most basic unit. The length of each line of a poem is part of its composition. Compare this to normal prose, where it doesn't really matter where on the page the sentence ends, just so long as it ends. The length of the lines in a poem will affect the meaning of the words within those lines, as well as the sound and rhythm as the poem is read.

**Line breaks** can essentially be used to add

another form of punctuation.

Often, a sentence or clause in a poem ends at the end of a line, and this is called an "end-stop." But poets also commonly allow a sentence or clause to leak over into the next line, a process called **enjambment**, and this has interesting effects on how a phrase is read and how we react to it. The choice of words that come before and after a line break may also be used to alter a poem's meaning. Here's an example of enjambment:

Whenever I think of a pretty   
Girl, I grow old.

**Greater focus on the sound of words**

The most obvious way poems make unique use of sound is through rhyme (if you don't know what "rhyme" is, then 1) go back to kindergarten, and 2) OD on Dr. Seuss). **Full rhyme**, rhyming the last word of each line, has become less frequent in this century, as modern poets find the technique too simple and predictable. However, looser types of **half rhyme**, matching some of the sounds between words at various places throughout a poem, are still a fundamental component of most modern poetry. Be conscious of when a modern poet uses rhyme, and ask yourself: what is his/her purpose is in using it? For example, does it comment on tradition? Does it more closely associate two images?

**Rhythm** (the flow and beat of a poem) is another important aspect of a poem's sound, and a metered poem has a carefully prescribed rhythmic structure.

**Density**

**Density** refers to a poem's richness in texture… that is, the level of mental effort required to draw out its multiple levels of meaning and emotion. We read poetry more slowly and carefully than other prose (when we read it at all) because of these subsurface meanings that arise from what the words imply, their **connotations**, in addition to what they mean literally, their **denotations**. Density is what can often make a poem such a bitch to read.

Much of poetry's density comes from its focus on **simile**, **metaphor** and **symbolic language**. While a simile compares two dissimilar things directly, using the words "like" or "as" (you're as happy as a dog in heat), a metaphor implies that one thing actually is another thing (you are a dog in heat). A **symbol** is a concrete thing that stands in for another thing, usually an idea or quality. You probably learned about these three things in eighth grade.

**Associations**

By associating concrete images in unexpected ways, poetry is able to get closer to abstract concepts like Life and Love and Death, engaging our emotions rather than our intellect. Poetry can thus do more than just signify, using the limited number of words in our language. Instead it uses language to paint a picture. For example, in Emily Dickinson's "The Chariot (Because I Could Not Stop for Death)," the image of death coming for the narrator is conveyed by the image of a thoughtful coachman, rather than a literal description of her death, and the poem is more haunting and effective as a result.

**Irony**

Often a poem introduces distance between what happens or is said and what we expect to happen or to perceive, causing us to feel the tension between the two conflicting ideas. This uneasy (and sometimes amusing) distance, or disassociation, is called irony. It's easier to illustrate than explain. Emily Dickinson uses irony in much of her poetry, as when in "There's a certain slant of light" she refers to light as a thing with weight, thus playing on the fact that light literally has no weight, and also that the word "light" literally signifies the absence of weight.

Despite - and in part because of - these contradictions, we know what she means. Irony does not mean simply, "things that suck." For example, if it were to rain on your wedding day, that would suck, but it would not be ironic. A better example of irony would be to write a song with irony as its topic, and then to list a bunch of events that aren't at all ironic. Don't ya think? [Alanis Morrisette?]

You now know how to recognize a poem, but to effectively interpret one and know what's going on, you need to learn a little about the language of poetry: like the elements of meter, form, and diction, for example.

Meter  
Form  
Diction or poetic language

**Meter**

**Meter** is the regular rhythmic pattern of a poem. As we stated before, paying attention to the rhythm of words is part of what makes a poem a poem. In English, the units of rhythm are rather simple - speech may be broken down into patterns of **stressed** and **unstressed beats** (that is, stressed and unstressed syllables). The basic unit of rhythm in a poem is the **foot**, consisting of either two or three of these beats. Don't worry too much about the foot. It's just cool to know.

Now, **iambic pentameter** is one of the most common types of meter, or **metrical schemes**. The word **pentameter** is used because the line is broken up into five feet. An **iamb** is a poetic foot consisting of one unstressed beat followed by a stressed one, and is often given the notation "**|u x|**," where **u** is the unstressed beat and **x** the stressed one (for example, "to-DAY". An example of how iambic pentameter is read would be:

| i WANT| to GO | to REST | au RANT | this EVE |

Other common types of feet are the **trochee**, a stressed beat followed by an unstressed one "|x u|" ("SWEET-ner"), and the **spondee**, two stressed beats in succession "|x x|" ("LET'S GO"). We will not discuss the familiar triple-x pattern: "|x x x|" - three beats in a row means you're just playing with it. Get it?… triple x… beating… man, we're sickos…

Earlier poets were far more concerned than contemporary ones with meter. Many poets wrote almost their entire body of work in a very limited number of metrical schemes. Shakespeare, for example, wrote his sonnets and the poetic language of his plays in iambic pentameter. So when he wrote, in his ironic "anti-sonnet" (praising his beloved for everything she is not),

"My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,"

he was using iambic pentameter.

To demonstrate the concept of iambic pentameter, we can break this line into five feet, each with an iamb, one unstressed followed by a stressed syllable, like so (read the line aloud and compare the stressed and unstressed syllables with the chart above them):

|u

x

|u

x

|u

x

|u

x

|u

x|

My

mis-

tress'

eyes

are

noth

ing

like

the

sun,

Iambic pentameter is one of the most common metrical schemes in English, because

|u

x

|u

x

|u

x

|u

x

|u

x|

it

sounds

the

most

like

or-

di-

nar-

y

speech.

However, much of twentieth-century poetry has been written in a style without a carefully observed meter, called **free verse**. If you like, call it slacker poetry. Rules, shmules.

**Form**

The **form** of a poem, like the meter, is a prescribed pattern, but in fact is even stricter, often involving the meter, structure, rhyme scheme and tone of a poem. The basic unit of form is the **stanza**, the series of lines that follow the form before it starts over again. So think of a stanza in poetry as like each new verse or chorus of a song. Often, a new stanza is preceded by a blank line. Even if you're not familiar with the form of the poem you're reading, a pattern will still most likely become evident as you read along.

Certain forms of poetry have become associated with particular subject matter, and so, for example, while an earlier poet like Shakespeare might use the sonnet in its conventional role as a love poem, a modern poet like W.B. Yeats could use the same form ironically, to describe the rape of Leda by Zeus, in his poem "Leda and the Swan." Poets are deep.

Modern free verse poetry (without regular meter) is also written in **open form**, meaning that the form may vary throughout the poem. You may have begun to notice that modern poets don't much like to follow a lot of rules. (Remember, however, that they do follow **some** rules. The stuff you scribble in your diary may have some value to you, but without some kind of discipline it most likely really is just scribbling. Except for the part about which Backstreet Boy is cutest… we all know that it's A.J.)

**Common forms**

**Blank verse**, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, is one of the simplest forms, in that each line is essentially a new stanza. Shakespeare used blank verse for the poetry in his plays (although not for his sonnets, which were rhymed).

We've provided a chart below of some of the longer forms. Note that this chart is in no way complete - there are plenty of less common forms you may run into, and a lot more information is available about these forms elsewhere. A poet may even create his/her own form.

**Name**

**Lines per stanza**

**Description**

Couplet

Two

Each stanza is a rhyming pair of lines

Triplet,   
tercets

Three

Triplets have three rhymed lines, while tercets have only two

Quatrain

Four

The commonest form in poetry, often thought of as A-B-A-B structure

Sestet,  
sestina

Six

Sestets may form part of a longer sonnet or sestina

Rhyme royal

Seven

Named for James I of Scotland, who composed in that form (and got to name it, 'cuz he was the King)

*Ottava rima*

Eight

Now usually reserved for comic poetry

Spenserian  
stanza

Nine

Named for the author of the Faerie Queen

Sonnet

Fourteen

Commonly used in love poetry

Villanelle

Nineteen

A particularly tricky form, with a complex rhyme scheme

**Diction or poetic language**

**Diction** refers to the language of a poem, and how each word is chosen to convey a precise meaning. Poets are very deliberate in choosing each word for its particular effect, so it's important to know the origins and connotations of the words in a poem, not to mention their literal meaning, too.

You're now asking yourself (we can read lips), "How am I supposed to know the history and connotation of all these obscure words? I didn't even finish the eighth grade!"

No problem. Fortunately, the Oxford English Dictionary will be available online beginning March, 2000. (Please settle down, we're excited too.) The OED (not the GED, though that's also helpful) is an indispensable resource for anyone who really wants to "get" a poem. If you're a student, your university library will probably have a subscription. If not, you'll find that at only $550 a year, it's a real bargain. (Just kidding - if you're not a student, we recommend the tattered Pocket Webster's you've got holding up one leg of the coffee table.)

The OED offers many definitions for each word, and provides the time of their usage, so that when you're reading earlier poets, you can find the meaning of a word at the time the poem was written, and avoid interpretations only a modern reader would make. The dictionary also offers a sampling of uses of the word in prominent works of literature; so that where a poet is using a word to allude to a previous author's work - a common technique in poetry - you will have access to this added layer of meaning, as the previous work may help illuminate the later one.

If you don't have access to the online version of the OED, you may wish to just purchase the latest edition of the multi-volume print version to carry around with you. It should fit comfortably in the back of a mid-sized Ryder truck.

First of all, you're probably wondering why anyone would want to analyze a poem in the first place. You're not alone; as far back as the late eighteenth century William Wordsworth could lament that in our drive to understand all of nature and art, we "murder to dissect."

Nevertheless, we believe that there is such a thing as a poet's craft, and that a knowledge of the basics are the key to being able to understand that craft and even to fully appreciate a sophisticated poem. (This does not, however, apply to the recent poetic stylings of Jewel or T-Boz.)

We will focus here on what is sometimes called **practical criticism**. Its main function is to do a "**close reading**" of a poem, examining carefully the features of the text itself (such as those we've been discussing) to ferret out levels of meaning… or to weasel out levels of meaning, if you prefer another rodent.

The poem we're gonna look at is "My Last Duchess," by Robert Browning. If you're not familiar with the poem, check it out now, and maybe even print it out, so you'll know what the heck we're talking about.

**Scanning the lines**

**Scanning** (or scansion) is when you map out a line of poetry to figure out the meter (like we did earlier). With "My Last Duchess" the meter is easy. It's almost all in iambic pentameter. (The first line of a poem can often trick you, since the poet may vary the meter a bit just to get out of the gate, as Browning does here.) What can we say about this that's interesting (or perhaps we should rephrase that: what will interest your English professor)? Well, take the little we've said about iambic pentameter and run with it. It's conversational, and the words of this poem are all supposed to come from a single speaker, the Duke, so that's one reason why the poet may have chosen this meter. Another reason may be because Shakespeare and other dramatists had used this meter in their dramatic works (as blank verse) - Browning's goal is to illustrate a scene, and he has written many poems like this where a single character speaks. These have come to be called his **dramatic monologues**.

**Identifying the form**

When examining a poem to identify its form, you'll want to be aware of some of the common forms of poetry and the types of content with which they have become associated. The Poetry Handbook is an excellent resource for this type of stuff.

You may recognize the form here as a series of couplets, each stanza a set of two rhyming lines. With a little research you would learn that couplets written in iambic pentameter are called **heroic couplets**. The heroic couplet was used by many great poets for their epic works, up until the nineteenth century, when it fell from favor. So Browning's use of the form in the mid-nineteenth century goes against the trend of his time. As you read the poem, you may notice that the "dramatic irony" of a narrator believing he is showing off his attractive qualities, when he is really revealing to his listener that he is vain and evil, is paralleled by the irony of using an epic form of poetry for a sordid monologue. This "interpreting poetry" stuff isn't so tough, so long as you know how to look for the cool things.

**Examining the diction**

The diction of the poem is perhaps most interesting in the way it demonstrates the narrator's imperiousness, the way he gives orders, with phrases like, "I gave commands," from line 45 (we know the commands weren't nice, whatever they were). Elsewhere the poet makes interesting use of lineation for the same effect. When line 2 ends in the words, "I call," they become a command. In line 15 the line again ends in an enjambment, with the phrase "called that spot," instead of the full phrase "called that spot/of joy into the Duchess' cheek"; the Duke makes an involuntary act - the Duchess blushing - into a voluntary act of "calling" on his part. Ironically, this is the one aspect of her character that he *cannot* control.

**General observations**

The central irony of the "My Last Duchess" is of course that the Duke wanted so much to bring the Duchess's beauty within his own control, that he was willing to destroy her (along with her beauty) to do it. A little bit like trying too hard to analyze a poem, no?

There's been a lot of debate among scholars as to how much history, social context, psychology, and gender concerns should be overlaid onto one's analysis. In any case, some knowledge of the poem's subject matter can help in your reading - you'll want to at least understand what the poet is literally talking about. Scholarly editions, like those published by Norton and Oxford, offer useful footnotes that provide context and define obscure or obsolete phrases.

Far more could be said about this poem, though not here in this SYW. We hope we've at least given you a sense of the importance of understanding these basic elements of poetry and their effects.

Is it possible to read too much into a poem? Yeah, it probably is. But believe us, we haven't even come close. Whether each reader will accept another reader's interpretation as the final truth is part of what makes poetry rewarding. Despite what a professor may tell you, there is no "correct" reading of a poem. The more complex a poem is, the more open it is to multiple meanings. But this does not mean you should be a lazy reader, and just sit back and stare at a poem to see how it "feels." If you're going to spend your time doing something as wussy as reading poetry, you'll want to put a little effort into it, anyway.

Having said that, if it's still possible for you to enjoy poetry for its own sake, to be carried away by the language and rhythm of a poet's work, then you are getting something out of it. In fact, you're getting the thing that makes it worthwhile in the first place.

To check out some more great poetry (if you've not had your fill for, say, the next fifteen years or so), check out Representative Poetry On-Line, maintained by the University of Toronto English Department. They've got hundreds of poets and poems available online. We leave you with our own special poem:

Roses are red  
Violets are blue  
That's our advice  
(In "Verdana" font too!)

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http://www.mun.ca/writingcentre/poems.shtml

***Notes on Analyzing Poems***

To effectively analyze a poem, you must first read the poem a number of times. Reading it aloud, paying careful attention to the way in which its lines are punctuated, will usually help you to understand it, while alerting you to any special effects created by its rhythms, rhymes, or other sounds.

As you read and reread the poem, underline words and phrases you suspect may be particularly significant. Make notes in the margins. Ensure that you fully understand every word used in the poem: no word is there by chance! And go "the extra mile" -- consult a dictionary when you are in doubt about word meanings.

Ask yourself questions to guide you in coming to terms with the poem. Then, attempt to say in your own words what theme you feel the poem is addressing, and to decide which poetic elements and techniques, evident in the poem, are particularly responsible for conveying that theme. Then select from among them those elements and devices about which you feel you can write most intelligently and compellingly. Now you can try to formulate a rough thesis statement.

Next, try to integrate this thesis statement into a good introduction that

• names the poem and the author

• makes clear the poem's subject and thematic intent

• provides your thesis or claim

• identifies the poetic devices you will discuss in support of that thesis or claim

• indicates the way you plan to develop your argument

Now proceed to introduce and discuss the poetic elements you mentioned in your introduction, in the order in which you mentioned them. Ensure that you deal with each poetic element in a paragraph of its own, and that you introduce the topic of each paragraph with a carefully-focused topic sentence. Also ensure that you end each paragraph with a concluding sentence that sums up the thrust of that paragraph's argument and paves the way for the next poetic element to be discussed. (Alternatively, you can begin the next paragraph with a transitional phrase that links the new element with the one you have just summarized.)

Finally, write a conclusion that restates your thesis (but using different words), briefly reviews the key poetic elements you discussed in your essay, and provides a sense of closure. A good closing technique is to somehow link the claim you have made about this particular poem with the poet's general style or preoccupations, or to suggest a way in which the topic you have just discussed relates more generally to some aspect of human existence.

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